The Impoverished Politics of Poverty

Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. Pp. vi, 280. $27.95.

Lawrence M. Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. Pp. xii, 356. $25.00.

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Over the last decade, American responses to poverty and other urban problems have been shaped (and distorted) by anxiety over a new urban "underclass." Since the 1980s, a growing number of social scientists and policymakers have attributed poverty to the behavior and culture of the poor, focusing on such factors as family breakdown, criminality, individual pathology, welfare dependence, and out-of-wedlock childbearing. They have sought to explain the seeming paradox of worsening poverty in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and the Great Society. In an era of racial backlash and government retrenchment, theories that place responsibility for continued poverty on the poor themselves have gained prominence.

This emphasis on culture and behavior in American poverty scholarship and public policy revives old themes of morality, virtue, and vice. From the early days of the republic, popular interpretations of poverty looked to the actions and values of the poor as an explanation for their impoverishment. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American political discourse, with its ethic of self-help and theory of citizenship that emphasized virtue and responsibility, linked poverty to immorality.[1] In the 1980s, emerging neoconservatism gave this old

1. See Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); on Britain, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1983); on attitudes toward work, see Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); on notions of virtue and responsibility in republican thought, see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: The Political Economy of Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

language a new cast, infusing it with a potent antistatism. Reagan-era conservatives, led by Charles Murray and George Gilder, advocated a sort of scholarly Calvinism, which presumes that the poor are inherently immoral and susceptible to the sins of lust (promiscuous sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy), sloth (unwillingness to work), and greed (grasping for handouts). In their modern formulation, the federal government feeds the depravity of the poor through the "perverse" incentives of welfare.[2] These conservatives blamed poverty not only on the poor, but also on New Deal and Great Society social programs, which they claimed fostered dependency.

At the same time, liberal social scientists, most notably William Julius Wilson and Paul Peterson, and journalists such as Ken Auletta and Nicholas Lemann, combined analyses of the structural causes of poverty—unequal education, unemployment, deindustrialization, and discrimination—with a new emphasis on the behavior of the poor. The new scholarship on poverty revived discussions of family structure, sexuality, and crime that had fallen out of fashion with the social tumult of the 1960s. For example, Wilson considered structural changes in urban America in conjunction with "pathologies" of the poor such as out-of-wedlock childbearing and crime.[3] Peterson acknowledged discrimination and technological changes, but put greater weight on the effects of welfare on the poor.[4] Auletta and Lemann fused discussions of changing urban economies with moving, quasi-ethnographical descriptions of broken families, plagued by violence and drugs.[5]

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2. Murray, who is affiliated with conservative think tanks such as the Manhattan Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, set the anti-welfare-state agenda with his widely cited *Losing Ground*. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Murray's recent work concerns a revitalization of arguments about the relationship of race to intelligence. Gilder, a prominent advocate of "supply-side economics," enjoyed great influence in the early Reagan years. See George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

3. William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Wilson, a University of Chicago sociologist and director of the multiyear Chicago Poverty and Family Life project, set the agenda for recent scholarship on urban poverty.

4. Paul E. Peterson, ed., *The New Urban Reality* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985); Peterson and Mark Rom, *Welfare Magnets: A New Case for a National Standard* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990). Peterson, professor of government at Harvard and former director of Governmental Studies at The Brookings Institution, shaped the poverty research agenda through his books and his position as head of the Social Science Research Council's Committee on the Urban Underclass.

5. Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (New York: Random House, 1982); Nicholas Lemann, "The Origins of the Underclass," *Atlantic Monthly* 258 (July 1986): 54-68; Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991). Auletta and Lemann, both liberal journalists, played a key role in bringing the issue of the urban "underclass" to the public agenda. Their works emphasized the difference between the poor and the rest of American society. They advocated a revitalization and reformulation of government antipoverty programs.

Much recent scholarship on poverty—and popular conceptions of the problem—has proceeded from these popular and scholarly arguments about attitudes and pathologies, rather than from attention to such structural forces as racial discrimination and changing labor markets. The "underclass" debate centers on such themes as the absence or presence of a work ethic in the inner city, the contagious effects of residence in a poor neighborhood on rates of unwed motherhood, and the relationship of migration patterns to differential welfare payments. Social and economic forces, including deindustrialization and racial discrimination, ride in the back of a scholarly bus driven by discussions of individual attitudes, actions, and values.

New books by Christopher Jencks and Lawrence Mead attempt to reshape the recent "underclass" debate by staking out heterodox positions that incorporate aspects of both structural and behavioral interpretations of poverty. Jencks, author of a pioneering study of inequality and professor of sociology at Northwestern, is in the mainstream of recent poverty scholarship.[6] His latest work, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass*, attempts to debunk contemporary wisdom on the causes and consequences of urban poverty by posing an empirical challenge to recent scholarship on the urban poor. A self-described economic liberal and cultural conservative, he attacks the shibboleths of left and right. Jencks's book provides a concise introduction to recent work on welfare policy, the economics of racial discrimination, and the "underclass." He distills a bewildering array of statistics and presents them with a clarity seldom found in social scientific writing.

Jencks adds a necessary dose of reality to recent discussions of poverty. He questions the significance of the supposed correlation among high joblessness rates, low education levels, dysfunctional family structure, race, welfare receipt, and crime rates. "The term 'underclass,'" he asserts, "conjures up a chronically jobless high school dropout who has two or three children out of wedlock, has very little money to support them, and probably has either a criminal record or a history of welfare dependence" (p. 201).[7] Jencks claims that the widespread use of the term "signals a political shift: instead of blaming poverty on society, as we did in the late 1960s, we are now more inclined to blame poverty on the poor" (p. 120).

Jencks's research results challenge many of the assumptions underlying most popular and scholarly writing on urban problems and social

6. See Christopher Jencks, et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972); Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991).

7. All textual page notations for Jencks's work refer to Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty and the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

policy. For example, Jencks calmly defuses media-fueled hysteria about rising crime rates. After carefully considering FBI figures on homicide, National Center for Health Statistics data, the Census Bureau's National Crime Survey, and nationwide police statistics, Jencks concludes that the available data on crime provide "no support for the hypothesis that violence in general or black violence in particular has become appreciably more common since the early 1970s. On the contrary, they suggest that violence has declined somewhat" (p. 185).

Jencks debunks the popular myth of an epidemic of high school dropouts. Dropout rates actually decreased during the last twenty years, especially among blacks. Jencks's studies reveal that black dropout rates plummeted from 28 percent in 1970 to 15 percent in 1988. White dropout rates barely changed during this period, only falling from 11 percent to 9 percent (pp. 173-74). Further challenging the received wisdom, Jencks finds that the rate of teenaged motherhood is not on the rise; the rate declined during the 1960s and 1970s, and has remained fairly constant over the last decade (p. 191).

On Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Jencks's data undermine conservative arguments that profligate welfare payments provide both incentives to bear children out of wedlock and disincentives to seek work. He shows that the proportion of female household heads with children receiving AFDC declined from 63 percent in 1972 to 45 percent in 1988; at the same time, the mean payment of AFDC diminished from $435 per month in 1970 to $350 per month in 1980. In constant dollars, AFDC payments were lower for a family of four in 1980 than they were in 1960 (p. 77). The final chapter of the book, which was co-authored by sociologist Kathryn Edin, adds a human dimension to Jencks's statistical analysis by including personal interviews with Cook County, Illinois AFDC recipients. All but one woman questioned relied on outside income to cover basic monthly expenditures. More than half had income from unreported jobs; many others depended on support from boyfriends, parents, or other relatives. A few sold drugs or engaged in prostitution to supplement their meager government payments.

Equally sobering are Jencks's findings on changes in the labor market and in the rates of single motherhood. For example, his figures indicate that the level of male joblessness and the rate of births to unmarried mothers have increased steadily since the 1970s. Jencks does not sensationalize these statistics, and he stresses that these trends do not indicate the emergence of a new, dangerous "underclass." Single motherhood and joblessness are phenomena growing in all segments of American society, not simply among the poor. Indeed,

many of the problems associated with the inner-city poor are manifestations of changes that affect all members of American society.

Jencks consciously attempts to eschew sloppy terminology and ideologies that rest upon unsubstantiated claims about the poor, asserting that they "lead to bad social policy" (p. 20). He argues that the problems of social policy and poverty are too complex to be reduced to a single theory or a single solution. Although he admits that his "prejudices favor cultural conservatism, economic egalitarianism, and incremental reform" (p. 21), Jencks tries to be as even-handed as possible, "looking for evidence that they [his assumptions] are wrong as well as evidence that they are right" (p. 21). In his quest for an elusive impartiality, Jencks avoids polemics. By positioning his work as somehow above ideology and by studiously avoiding the simplifications that often accompany ideological tracts on public policy, Jencks wraps himself in the empiricist's mantle of objectivity.

While Jencks rejects the moral language of blame and character, he nonetheless continues to use the term "underclass" indiscriminately. The term has become an inaccurate and powerfully evocative metaphor for a reality far more diverse than policymakers and pundits have recognized. It encapsulates middle-class Americans' most intimate fears while reaffirming their sense of social distance and moral superiority. It assumes a causal relationship between behavior and economic status, linking poverty to racial stereotypes, fears of crime, family breakdown, and uncontrolled sexuality. In an age of political correctness, the superficial neutrality of the term has made it an acceptable means of conveying thinly veiled moral judgments about the American urban poor, especially the African-American poor.[8]

Ultimately, Jencks resorts to a cultural explanation for poverty that is, at root, a moral argument. Like recent liberal and conservative commentators on urban poverty, Jencks is obsessed with behavior, especially behavior that does not "follow norms . . . that most of society endorses" (p. 121). For example, he blames the high rate of poverty in female-headed families on a decline in family values rather than on inadequate wages and poor daycare:

> Poor children have suffered most from our newly permissive approach to reproduction. Shotgun weddings and lifetime marriages caused adults a lot of misery, but they ensured that every child had a claim on some adult male's earnings unless his father died. That is no longer the case. This change is, I think, a by-

8. Prominent critiques of the term "underclass" include Herbert J. Gans, *People, Plans, and Policies: Essays on Poverty, Racism, and Other National Urban Problems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 328-43; Michael B. Katz, "The 'Underclass' as a Metaphor of Social Transformation," in Michael B. Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-23; Adolph Reed, "The Underclass as Myth and Symbol," *Radical America* 24 (1992): 21-40.

> product of growing individualism and commitment to personal freedom (p. 135).

Here, Jencks's view of history is seriously flawed. Family violence, child abandonment, and parental neglect were all too common in the past. Indeed, throughout American history, poor families have depended on the earnings of poor children and women, as well as those of men, for their survival.[9]

Jencks's emphasis on behavior leads him to offer a heavily qualified endorsement of James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein's controversial study of the genetic origins of crime.[10] Despite Jencks's extraordinary caution (and overall judiciousness) in maneuvering through the political and theoretical minefield of hereditarianism, his discussion of genetic theories of human behavior is a case study in the dangers of well-meaning social scientific forays into biology. He ignores recent biological scholarship that finds that race is a spurious genetic concept.[11]

Moreover, "cultural conservatism" clouds Jencks's analysis. He discounts the discrimination faced by unmarried and divorced mothers in the labor market. He ignores the fact that, on average, women earn only 66 percent of what men earn, a disparity that is probably greater among poorly educated and untrained female workers.[12] Jencks disregards the reality that welfare and AFDC benefits scarcely enable single mothers and their children to survive, let alone achieve financial independence.[13] He is aware of the economic burdens of single motherhood, but he shifts his discussion from economics to behavior.

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9. The literature on this topic is vast. For example, see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship Between Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Michael Haines, "Poverty, Economic Stress, and the Family in a Late Nineteenth-Century City," and Claudia Goldin, "Family Strategies and the Family Economy in the Late Nineteenth Century," in Theodore Hershberg, ed., *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Kathryn Neckerman, "The Emergence of 'Underclass' Family Patterns, 1900-1940," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*, 194-219.

10. James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).

11. Recent scholarship shows that race exists only as a social construction. Biologists and geneticists argue that the genetic differences within the so-called racial groups are as great as the differences between the groups. For a general overview of scholarship in this area, see Richard Lewontin, *Human Diversity* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1981). For more specialized discussions, see B. D. H. Latter, "Genetic Differences within and between Populations of the Major Human Subgroups," *American Naturalist* 116 (1980): 220-37; L. L. Cavalli-Sforza, et al., "Reconstruction of Human Evolution: Bringing Together Genetic, Archaeological and Linguistic Data," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, USA 85 (August 1988): 6002-06. I thank Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz for introducing me to this important scientific literature.

12. Diana Pearce, "Welfare Is Not for Women: Why the War on Poverty Cannot Counter the Feminization of Poverty," in Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 268.

13. Only 14 percent of poor female-headed families move out of poverty through welfare because "the levels of support for female-headed families are stingy and the harassment great."

Jencks calls for a reformulation of values to solve the problem of poverty, advocating a heightened sense of "responsibility for both one another and the society of which we are a part" (p. 22). This high-minded proposal begs difficult questions. Can social policy substantially modify behavior without coercion? Can the federal government or local governments combat "a degree of selfishness and irresponsibility, especially on the part of males, that is extremely destructive in any community, but especially in poor communities" (p. 22)? American history is littered with the remnants of institutions (prisons, asylums, poorhouses) that unsuccessfully attempted to reform the behavior of the poor. Repeatedly, political figures have had little success in their attempts to use the bully pulpit to exert a moral influence over individual behavior. Ultimately, the logic of Jencks's and other liberal arguments about "underclass behaviors" leads to a policy of coercion.

Coercion is the subtext of Lawrence Mead's *New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America*. According to Mead, a professor of political science at New York University, the most pressing political issue today is the emergence of a "dependency politics" (p. 2).[14] Mead's emphasis on dependency is the most recent manifestation of the view that poverty is rooted in personal and cultural deficiencies. His book marks a significant shift in conservative discourse on poverty, away from the libertarian views of Charles Murray and George Gilder, toward a new authoritarianism. For Mead, the solution to the underclass problem is a "new paternalism" (p. 181) that employs coercive policies to change the behavior of the poor. Mead's generally unconvincing arguments are based upon a selective reading of recent books and articles on urban poverty; sweeping, unverifiable generalizations about human nature; and an evocation of some of the basest racial and ethnic stereotypes, thinly veiled in the language of social science.

Mead is correct in arguing that concentrated, persistent urban poverty is a fundamentally new phenomenon rooted in high rates of joblessness in American inner cities. In previous periods of American history, while poverty and unemployment were widespread, most poor people were active participants in the labor market. From the mid-1950s to the present, more and more poor people, especially black men, have found themselves squeezed out of the labor market.

Mary Jo Bane, "Politics and Policies of the Feminization of Poverty," in Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 388-89.

14. All textual page notations for Mead's work refer to Lawrence M. Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

As a result, the new poverty is marked by a growing number of poor people who do not work at all or at best work irregularly.[15]

Mead seeks an explanation for the emergence of a class of "non-working poor," focusing on single black mothers and young black men. He attributes joblessness among the poor to "a decline in work effort" or a voluntary "withdrawal" from the labor market (p. 10). Mead rejects such structural explanations of joblessness as low wages, lack of jobs, inaccessible childcare, and racial discrimination. He even rejects the explanation favored by conservatives: disincentives to work generated by welfare.

To make his case that black culture explains joblessness, Mead tries to refute economic and sociological explanations of joblessness. Asserting that jobs for unskilled workers in the United States are plentiful, he points to many recent Latin American immigrants who have found sweatshop, restaurant, daycare, and janitorial work. According to Mead, the experience of illegal immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala shows that "there is considerable room in the labor market for low-skilled workers" (p. 92). He further conjectures that more Arab and African immigrants than African-American "high school dropouts" drive taxicabs (p. 91).

Why African-Americans have fared worse than immigrants is a complex and vexing question that Mead answers incompletely and anecdotally. Mead's conclusions about immigrants' opportunities and job availability do not survive close scrutiny. First, many recent immigrants to the United States—Cuban, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, Middle-Eastern, West-Indian, and African—came with significant educational and financial resources. Those immigrants with the greatest financial resources have been able to start businesses and to provide jobs and capital for their fellow immigrants.[16] Driving a cab, to take Mead's example, requires either money to buy a medallion (which can cost over $100,000 in many major cities) or connections to cab companies, which are increasingly owned by single ethnic groups. Second, immigrants with less financial resources have carved out ethnic niches in particular industries that provide both secure employment for unskilled workers and a reliable source of labor for employers. Racial discrimination has prevented African-Americans from creating similar niches.[17] Finally, recent Third World immigrants

15. Thomas J. Sugrue, "The Structures of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*, 85-117.

16. Edna Bonacich and John Modell, *The Economic Basis of Ethnic Solidarity: Small Business in the Japanese-American Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980); Ivan Light, "Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise in North America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7 (1984): 195-216. See also Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

17. Suzanne Model, "The Ethnic Niche and the Structure of Opportunity: Immigrants and Minorities in New York City," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*, 161-93.

(especially illegal aliens) are more willing than African-Americans to accept substandard jobs because American wages are high relative to the best wages in their native countries. They are also often afraid to take recourse against exploitative employers for fear of jeopardizing their immigration status.

Mead also discounts the spatial mismatch hypothesis, which attributes inner-city joblessness to the movement of manufacturing jobs from the cities to suburbs, to largely white rural areas and small towns, and to locations outside of the United States altogether. He does not consider that the jobs that remain in cities are increasingly closed to those with poor educations, and that the new service-sector employment offers poor benefits, wages, and working conditions.[18] According to Mead, poor people can commute to distant suburbs via car pools or public transportation. He overestimates the limited access that poor people have to reliable cars and affordable car insurance, and overlooks the fact that funding cuts and falling ridership have prevented public transportation from penetrating the suburbs effectively. He relies on studies conducted in 1969 and 1970 for information about the transportation options of the poor (p. 102). Moreover, he discounts the difficulty that inner-city workers have in getting access to information about jobs in suburban locales.[19] To the extent that Mead acknowledges the flight of employers from urban areas, he states that "unpleasant ghetto conditions may be driving firms out of cities" (p. 110), despite abundant evidence that firms have relocated to avoid high taxes, unionized work forces, transportation expenses, and increasingly, environmental regulations and labor laws.

Mead also denies that any significant discriminatory barriers to black employment exist. "The end of Jim Crow," he argues, "does mean that blacks usually can find some employment, provided they have the most basic skills" (p. 113). Contrary to Mead's claims, studies of specific industries show that despite civil rights laws, employers and unions regularly discriminate against blacks.[20] For example, extensive surveys and interviews with Chicago-area employers (which Mead cites and misinterprets) find that "employers [do] not hesitate

18. See Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Sugrue, "Structures of Urban Poverty," 100-10; John Kasarda, "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass," *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science* 501 (January 1989): 26-47.

19. Mead ignores powerful evidence of Chicago's Gautreaux experiment that found a dramatic improvement in the economic fortunes of poor black welfare mothers when they moved from the inner city to subsidized housing in Chicago's white suburbs, gaining access to jobs unknown and unavailable to their urban counterparts. James E. Rosenbaum and Susan Popkin, "Employment and Earnings of Low-Income Blacks Who Move to Middle-Class Suburbs," in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*, 342-56.

20. Roger Waldinger and Thomas Bailey, "The Continuing Significance of Race: Racial Conflict and Racial Discrimination in Construction," *Politics and Society* 19 (1991): 291-323.

to generalize about race or ethnic differences in the quality of the labor force."[21] Prospective employers harbor suspicions about black workers, believing them to be unreliable, hostile, and prone to committing crimes. Black job applicants must overcome negative stereotypes to obtain employment. Mead nonetheless concludes that "[t]he sentiment against black men appears, unfortunately, to be well earned, and it is difficult to believe that many competent black workers are being denied opportunity" (p. 114). Even when employers reject black job applicants for patently discriminatory reasons, blacks are to blame.

Mead believes that most recent studies of poverty are marred by "sociologism," a view of the poor as victims of forces beyond their control (p. 128). "By disowning personal responsibility," argues Mead, "sociologism assigns the moral capacity of people to the environment" (p. 131). According to Mead, the crux of the problem of poverty is "the *passivity* of the seriously poor in seizing the opportunities that apparently exist for them" (p. 12). His antidote to "sociologism" is grand theorizing about human nature.

To explain this alleged passivity, Mead turns to psychology and culture. In Mead's vision, the crisis of joblessness among young black men and single black mothers has its roots in African-American culture. Mead resorts to racial innuendo in his arguments that blacks have a "deep conviction that they have to 'get things from white people' if they are to live a decent life" (pp. 56-57). He blames residential segregation on blacks, asserting that "[i]f poor blacks functioned better, whites would show less resistance to living among them" (p. 57). Here, Mead underestimates the intransigence of white racial prejudice.[22] Mead also holds blacks responsible for refusing

> to work hard in jobs that do not immediately convey much income or prestige. . . . [Before the 1960s], working hard and going to church were much of what black culture meant. Today, tragically, it is more likely to mean rock music or the rapping of drug dealers on ghetto street corners. That change, rather than any change in the surrounding society, seems to lie at the origin of the underclass (p. 151).

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21. In their detailed surveys of Chicago-area employers, Kirschenman and Neckerman found that employers often refuse to consider seriously black inner-city job applicants. Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn M. Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But . . .': The Meaning of Race for Employers," in Jencks and Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass*, 203-34, quotation on 230.

22. Rates of racial segregation have remained constant in American cities since the 1920s, and whites have fiercely resisted the movement of blacks—regardless of class—into their communities throughout the last seventy-five years. Karl Taeuber and Alma Taeuber, *Negroes and Cities: Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965); Douglas S. Massey, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Mead's analysis, apart from its hyperbole and its striking resemblance to Jim Crow-era critiques of black culture, distorts history and exaggerates the contrast between the poor of the past and the poor of the present. Mead sees a sharp disjuncture between poverty in the past, when poor people worked hard, and in the present, when poor people evade work. For example, Mead contends that welfare mothers of today "commonly reject low paid positions" (p. 142). In Mead's view, the fact that fewer black women work as domestics today than in the past reveals their aversion to low-paying jobs. "In 1950," he states, "two-fifths of black women worked as domestics; in 1980, less than five percent did" (p. 142). Mead fails to mention that in 1950 entire occupational categories, including clerical and sales work, were virtually closed to black women because of discrimination.[23] Much of Mead's arguments rests on such dubious inferences.

According to Mead, the shift in attitudes of blacks toward work since the first half of the century is striking. "There was no work problem among them" in the 1930s (p. 32), but since then, "a relaxation of social discipline" has had detrimental consequences for blacks in the inner cities (pp. 35, 146).[24] He is not the only scholar to romanticize the pre-1960s black ghetto. William Julius Wilson contrasts the "communal ghetto" of the early twentieth century with the "hyperghetto" of today, and some ethnographers and oral historians have recorded the laments of old people who remember better days in inner cities.[25] Recent historical scholarship, however, shows that the economic conditions faced by most urban blacks in the 1920s and 1930s were at least as dire, if not more so, than those faced by inner-city blacks today. Rates of joblessness and unemployment among African-Americans were startlingly high during Mead's mythical golden age.[26]

Mead paints a picture of a deformed black culture that simultaneously saps blacks of their desire to work and makes them hostile, uncooperative workers. He claims that blacks are "uniquely prone to the attitudes contrary to work, and thus vulnerable to poverty and dependency" (p. 148). The poor, Mead contends, are "passively aggressive" (p. 157), especially poor blacks who "tend to express hos-

23. Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 27, 74-75, 146-47.

24. For evidence on this point, Mead relies on a few interviews from Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970).

25. For an influential discussion of the "communal ghetto," see Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, 52-62.

26. For an overview of historical scholarship that points to a bleaker picture of the life of inner-city blacks, see Joe William Trotter, Jr., "Blacks in the Urban North: The 'Underclass Question' in Historical Perspective," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*; see also Cheryl Greenberg, *"Or Does it Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

tility by devious refusals to cooperate, a passivity that infuriates whites—as it is intended to—without challenging them directly" (p. 157). By refusing to work and to cooperate in the workplace, poor blacks are waging "a second civil war," argues Mead. "This internal secession is no less threatening to the country than the more formal rupture in 1861" (p. 246).

Had Mead looked beyond the street corner gangs to the run-down apartment buildings, boarded-up houses, vacant lots, crumbling school buildings, pothole-ridden streets, and abandoned factories in virtually every inner city, he might have found a better explanation for the origins of his "second civil war." Any comprehensive discussion of today's poverty crisis must confront the profound transformation of American cities over the past forty years. Perhaps the urban poor are, to use Mead's phrases, simultaneously "rebellious" (p. 143) and "dutiful yet defeated" (p. 133) because of the extraordinarily bleak reality that they face every day—politically marginalized in an increasingly suburban-dominated political order, economically isolated in cities abandoned by major manufacturers, and racially stigmatized by fearful whites and skeptical employers.[27]

Disregarding the transformation of urban America as an important cause of today's poverty crisis, Mead focuses on what he calls "dependency politics" (p. 2). He draws from a mélange of ethnic and racial stereotypes to argue that the nonwhite poor are inert and dependent, unwilling to help themselves. According to Mead, blacks and other minorities are "constantly petitioning government to change the social rules in their favor" (p. 148). American Indians are "the most radically dependent of all poor groups," existing as "virtual wards of the state" (p. 154). Mead presents a caricature of ethnic and immigrant groups (and a contradictory one, given his earlier praise of immigrant resourcefulness), asserting that emigrants from the Third World come from cultures that are defeatist, "less interested in economic progress, suspicious of individual striving, and slower to change" (pp. 151-52). His characterization of ethnic and immigrant groups ignores crucial factors which influence the success of different immigrant groups, such as timing of arrival, education level, urban or rural origins, and access to capital.

Mead suggests that the nonwhite poor make unreasonable claims on the state and on "responsible" hardworking citizens "to escape from the pressures of the private sector" (p. 215). This notion of

27. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic* 270 (July 1992): 33-44; Loic J. D. Wacquant, "Urban Outcasts: Stigma and Division in the Black American Ghetto and the French Urban Periphery," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17 (September 1993): 366-83.

dependency is laden with class bias. Other groups in American society are far more dependent on the state than the poor (at far greater cost to society), but they escape Mead's vitriol. The largest group to benefit from federal largesse in the last half century has been the elderly. With the advent of Social Security, the number of older Americans participating in the workforce has declined precipitously, yet few elderly Americans live beneath the poverty line. Since the New Deal, farmers and agribusiness have received billions of dollars in government subsidies. Returning veterans have benefitted from a form of affirmative action through the GI Bill and the Veterans Administration housing program. White suburbanites benefit from government-backed loans, mortgage guarantees, and homeowners' tax deductions. They travel to malls (built with the assistance of tax abatements) on government-subsidized highways. Scientists, defense contractors, and savings and loan associations survive because of government handouts. Although the elderly, farmers, veterans, white suburbanites, bankers, and military-industrial complex rely heavily upon state aid, Mead portrays only the poor as the pathological victims of a culture of dependency.

A simple hypothetical reveals the flaws in Mead's analysis. Consider two sixteen-year-old boys: one white from an upper-middle-class suburb, the other black from an inner-city neighborhood. The white youth's parents are divorced, and he lives with his mother. He goes out with friends instead of doing his homework, listens to screeching rock and roll music, spends most of his weekends in an alcohol-induced haze, and often hangs out in the woods behind school smoking pot. He does poorly in his high school courses and does not get into a good college. His father finds a job for him with a family friend's business, or pays his son's tuition at a lesser college.

His inner-city counterpart hangs out with friends, listens to pounding rap music, and experiments with drugs. He does not do well in school. He lives with his divorced mother, and his father is a janitor in a local hospital. He graduates from high school, but he cannot afford college. He looks for work but finds nothing. Prospective employers, as Mead notes, believe that young black men are incompetent or risky, and they fear that the youth will be "passively aggressive" in the workplace (p. 157). He remains unemployed.

One youth is an unexceptional suburban teenager; the other is emblematic of the underclass. Both are feckless and alienated. Both are the product of broken homes. The difference between the two is not culture or dependency, but rather access to resources. The white suburbanite can fall back on his parents, who are tied into networks and institutions that can provide personal, economic, educational, and legal assistance. The inner-city youth has far fewer resources behind

him. Having grown up in a segregated, poor, urban neighborhood, he is stigmatized by his race and class.

Mead's analysis fails to take these class and racial differences into account. In Mead's view, policy should seek to reform the behavior of the poor. That means imposing strict rules and restraints. Mead notes approvingly that "[g]overnment is moving away from freedom and toward authority as a basic tool in social policy" (p. 181). According to Mead, the government must force poor people to work to inculcate a sense of responsibility. He is vague as to how exactly this "new paternalism" would be implemented (p. 181). He favors the reform of AFDC, the development of job-training programs, and the creation of workfare programs that oblige poor people to take employment as a condition of aid.

Jencks's *Rethinking Social Policy* and Mead's *New Politics of Poverty* underscore the recent profound changes in the inner cities and the lives of the poor, especially minorities. While the books correctly highlight the novelty of the current urban crisis and the serious flaws in current antipoverty policy, they exemplify the chronic weaknesses in recent poverty scholarship. They show how little we know about the causes of and solutions to poverty, despite at least a decade of scholarship on the urban "underclass."

Jencks and Mead, like most influential social scientists and policymakers today, are largely unwilling to address the larger social problems in which poverty is embedded. Too much scholarship in the mainstream of poverty research focuses on the attitudes and behaviors of individuals and families, giving but cursory attention to the larger and rapidly changing context of urban poverty. Poverty scholarship focuses disproportionately on urban blacks, who are presumed to have a different culture from the nonblack majority of poor people. This emphasis on race, culture, and behavior is politically expedient because it allows elected officials to earn easy political points by denouncing the poor for their behavior and by cutting unpopular social programs, while avoiding the difficult, and seemingly intractable, structural problems that are at the root of contemporary urban poverty. This scholarship ignores the fact that, at root, poverty is an economic, not cultural, problem. Policymakers would not be concerned about a culture of poverty if poor people were not poor.

The deficiencies in Mead's and Jencks's works highlight very basic questions that remain inadequately addressed in most current scholarship on poverty. We know very little about the origins of the current urban crisis. After World War II, two profound social changes interacted to transform American cities and to create concentrated, persistent urban poverty. The first was economic. Millions of Southern blacks sought employment opportunities in the North, fleeing disrup-

tions in the agricultural economy. The promise of steady, secure, and relatively well-paid employment in the North, however, proved illusory. Black joblessness began to rise dramatically in the 1950s, as manufacturing industries began to flee Northern cities. The history of the migration of blacks to the urban North after World War II and its economic consequences is still largely unwritten.[28]

The second change was spatial. Urban blacks after World War II found themselves trapped in a rapidly expanding, yet increasingly isolated, urban ghetto. White neighborhood associations and market forces interacted to subdivide cities racially and to magnify racial tensions.[29] The federal government, as well as state and local governments, further perpetuated racial divisions in major metropolitan areas by placing public housing in marginal parts of cities and by bankrolling white suburbanization through racially discriminatory housing subsidies.[30] This process, combined with deindustrialization, has resulted in the marginalization of the black urban poor. Poor urban blacks cannot escape neighborhoods that are increasingly bereft of economic and social institutions that mitigate the effects of poverty. Residence in the inner city has become a self-perpetuating stigma, and race-conscious employers often use place of residence to screen potential workers.[31] Understanding the process of ghettoization and stigmatization of the urban poor is essential to understanding the current crisis.

Both Mead and Jencks acknowledge that joblessness is an important cause of poverty but, like far too many social scientists, they rely on theories about motivation rather than empirical observation to explain the causes of joblessness. How do the poorly educated acquire the skills and training necessary for the newer, high-tech jobs that have replaced industrial work in inner cities? How do they make their way through the barriers that face them at the hiring gate? With-

28. The literature on the post-World War II black migration is slim. See Lemann, *The Promised Land*. For an implicit critique of Lemann, see Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 205-65. On the economic history of the urban poor since World War II, especially blacks after the migration, see Thomas J. Sugrue, "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race, Industrial Decline, and Housing in Detroit, 1940-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1992).

29. Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Sugrue, "Origins of the Urban Crisis," 150-278.

30. Kenneth T. Jackson, "Race, Ethnicity, and Real Estate Appraisal: The Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration," *Journal of Urban History* 6 (1980): 419-52; John Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 212-75. For an overview, see Raymond Mohl, "Shifting Patterns of American Urban Policy Since 1900," in Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond Mohl, eds., *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 1-45.

31. See Loic J. D. Wacquant, "Redrawing the Color Line: The State of the Ghetto in the 1980s," in Craig Calhoun and George Ritzer, eds., *Social Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992). For an examination of the effects of segregation, see Massey, *American Apartheid*.

out connections, how do the poor, especially minorities, get information about jobs? Historical scholarship suggests that unskilled laborers rely heavily on family and friendship networks to find employment.[32] Complicating Jencks's and Mead's commonplace assumptions about motivation is the underground economy of crime and drugs that provides income to a growing segment of the poor population. Recent ethnographies of youth and the drug trade reveal that success in this underground economy requires a highly developed work ethic, and that dealers are often very bright and enterprising.[33]

The reckless theorizing about work values, motivation, and behavior that characterizes most poverty scholarship begs larger questions about the social and psychological impact of life in inner cities on the poor. Studies of displaced middle-class workers and former factory workers in deindustrializing cities suggest that joblessness has a serious emotional cost for both the unemployed and their families.[34] Even less is known about the psychological effects of frustrated upward mobility. In earlier periods of American history, urban workers could at least expect that their jobs would provide them with the opportunity for residential mobility or their children with the probability of education and upward mobility. Social scientists and policymakers must replace hypotheses about the work ethic of the poor with an empirical understanding of how poor people cope with the difficulties of unemployment and shrinking job opportunities. Presently, their efforts shed little light on the causes and effects of poverty.[35]

Too many scholars, Jencks and Mead among them, posit vague cultural explanations of poverty without seriously examining the everyday lives and struggles of the poor.[36] To formulate effective policies

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32. See Model, "The Ethnic Niche," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*. For a historical study of how unemployed people found work in the past, see Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

33. On the informal or underground economy, see Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Black Poor and the Politics of Opposition in a New South City, 1929-1970," in Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate*, 293-333; Loic J. D. Wacquant, "'The Zone': le métier de hustler dans un ghetto noir américain," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 93 (1992), 39-58; on drugs, see Philippe Bourgois, "In Search of Horatio Alger: Culture and Ideology in the Crack Economy," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 17 (1990): 619-49; Mercer Sullivan, *"Getting Paid": Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

34. See Gregory Pappas, *The Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

35. For a useful digest of economic research, see Phillip Moss and Chris Tilly, *Why Black Men are Doing Worse in the Labor Market: A Review of Supply-Side and Demand-Side Explanations* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1991).

36. Only a few social scientists have gone into poor communities and conducted extensive interviews; most of the interesting work to date has been done by journalists. For an excellent journalistic account which is instructive for social scientists, see Alex Kotlowitz, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America* (New York: Morrow, 1991). See also Louise Lamphere, ed., *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the*

to deal with the problems of poverty, policymakers need to understand the complexities of urban life. This means moving beyond untested assumptions about personal motivation or invocations of "common sense" theory to learn more about the survival skills and strategies of the poor. Important unanswered questions include: How do the poor negotiate the difficult application procedures and rules that are a prerequisite for welfare relief or hospital care? How do perceptions of racial and ethnic difference affect the life chances of the poor? In what ways are the poor affected by the multiple failures (and noteworthy successes) of inner-city institutions such as schools? Do other neighborhood institutions such as churches, social clubs, and small businesses provide avenues out of poverty for some of the poor?[37]

The poverty of scholarship on the urban poor is not just an academic problem. The recent popular and scholarly resurgence of a culture of poverty theory underlies punitive poor laws and most recent welfare reform efforts. Following the lead of Republican governors such as William Weld of Massachusetts and John Engler of Michigan, a number of states have cut general assistance programs and AFDC payments on the ground that states should force the poor to work. Reform Democrats, including former New Jersey Governor Jim Florio, advocate penalties for AFDC recipients who have "too many" children and, like conservatives, flirt with punitive make-work welfare programs. Such social policies may win political kudos in an era of fiscal retrenchment, but they do more to assuage middle-class fears than to solve real problems.

The view of welfare from the bottom up is quite different. AFDC payments are scarcely an incentive to have more children; in fact, few families, if any, can subsist on paltry government checks alone. Welfare recipients do indeed work, whether raising children (often in trying circumstances), subsidizing rent by taking boarders or holding mediocre jobs on the sly to help pay the rent. They see the welfare system not as a co-conspirator in their struggle against the work ethic, but as an inert and unresponsive bureaucracy which enforces punitive and unfair regulations.[38] Until we abandon reckless theorizing about human nature and listen to the poor themselves, our insights into the world of poverty and our policy solutions will continue to be impoverished.

New Immigration (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992); Pierre Bourdieu, ed., *La misère du monde* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993).

37. The recent work of Robert Putnam suggests the importance of community networks and institutions in shaping the opportunities available to the poor. Robert Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *American Prospect* 13 (Spring 1993): 35-42.

38. Austin Sarat, "The Law is All Over: Power, Resistance, and the Legal Consciousness of the Welfare Poor," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 2 (1990): 343-79.